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### **Review of Environment and Society: Sustainability, Policy and the Citizen by Stewart Barr**

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**Fraser Stewart (2010) Review of: “Stewart Barr (2008) *Environment and Society: Sustainability, Policy and the Citizen*. Aldershot: Ashgate”. In Society & Natural Resources. Vol. 23, No. 11**

In the foreword of this timely and interesting book, Stewart Barr states that his aim is to explore how society can “promote the behavioral shifts necessary for creating the ‘sustainable society’ ” (xii). An admirable goal for work that seeks to go beyond established understandings and explanations of the human-nature relationship, to ask how people’s behavior towards the environment might be changed. The argument made is simple – that sustainability policy should move away from traditional understandings of environmental issues, which have had limited impact. These older ways of looking at the environment frame ecological concerns as “problems” that should be addressed through the provision of top-down information for the public on what environmental concerns are and how society can act together to solve them. In place of these negative approaches, Barr proposes adopting more positive behavioral change techniques, such as segmentation and social marketing, which have been used successfully elsewhere to market commodities.

Barr’s thesis is developed in the four sections that follow. In Part 1 “Contexts”, the background to the work is explored through discussion of three *green dilemmas* facing society: conservation and growth; the impact of global change and personal activism; and the tensions between the needs of individuals and society. In addition to framing the text, these dilemmas are also used as a way of considering the ways the “individual” has come to occupy a central role in sustainability debates and policy. This has occurred conceptually in relation to bottom-up approaches being touted as potentially holding the key to resolving environmental crises; but also politically, in recognition that citizens may be well-situated to help meet critical environmental

targets. Much of the discussion here will be familiar to readers, which draws on a number of contributions that include the economics of environmental concern, as well as neo-Malthusian ideas about population growth and finite resources. But Barr also provides a thorough introduction to the background of sustainable development as a political and normative concept. If there is anything frustrating thing about this first section however, it is Barr's referral to UK sustainability policy, when in reality he is really discussing England's. Despite taking care to explain the ways that sustainable development has been institutionalized into international, European, national, regional and local government policy and legislative arrangements, Barr fails to account for the impact devolution has had on sustainability discourse and policy in the UK since the late 1990's. But this aside, an excellent explanation is provided of how sustainability has changed from a top-down *governmental* concern, to an inclusive bottom-up one, stressing *governance* and community participation in encouraging behavioral change.

In Part 2 "Perspectives", Barr begins to explore the idea of environmental action through various contested household behaviors, such as recycling and green purchasing decisions that have traditionally been promoted by policy-makers and stakeholders as the most effective way citizens can help the environment. This is done through a useful discussion of how sustainable development has moved from a technocratic approach to a deliberative one, based on democracy and civic duty. This is illustrated with four case studies that chart the historical development of sustainability policy in the UK from the then Conservative Government's response to the Brundtland Commission, through to the social justice agenda of the new Labour Government elected in 1997. It is here that the geographer's critique of environmental policy is outlined, which rejected the scientization of public policy. Geography's

framing of environmental behaviour in relation to citizenship has largely involved an increased political scepticism and environmental discourses that favour deliberative approaches. But Barr remains unconvinced of the impact and effectiveness of these, arguing in Chapter 5 for greater collaboration and engagement of geographers with the methods and assumption of social psychology, a discipline that has long explored the links between attitudes and behavior. Using case studies related to energy saving, water conservation, waste management & recycling and green consumption, Barr suggests that traditional classifications of environmental behavior are contested and can be critiqued. Drawing on psychological assumptions pertaining to values, situations, perceptions and attitudes, Barr proposes an alternative perspective of “environmental action” that focuses on understandings of behavior and behavioral change that is transparent, which in turn enables the exploration and promotion of “sustainable lifestyles”.

In part three “Approaches”, the main empirical work is presented. Here the utility of taking a broad and holistic approach to framing, segmenting, explaining and promoting environmental action is outlined. The quantitative analysis offered suggests that environmental practices are intimately related to everyday activities in and around the home and as a result it is more helpful to examine “lifestyle groups”, rather than homogenising the population as one loose grouping. Barr’s research interest is in exploring people’s personal commitments to the environment, past attempts at encouraging behavioral change have been unsuccessful, he argues, because conceptual and political errors fail to realize the potential of citizenship engagement in behavioral change processes.

It is in the final part “Applications” that Barr brings his argument together by suggesting that environmental action can be conceptualized as environmental practice, achieved through the identification of lifestyle groups and understanding the barriers and motivations to acting in particular ways. But transferring from theory to practice can be difficult. To help with this, Barr and his colleagues built upon the earlier quantitative findings with qualitative methods to explore the relevance of social marketing in encouraging behavioral change among his typology of different lifestyle groups. Each focus group discussed three behavioral topics: purchase decisions, habitual behaviors and recycling behaviors, which were used to frame wider discussions of key issues that emerged from the quantitative data and the policy related objectives of the research. Barr concludes by arguing that behavioral change towards the environment might be better encouraged if policy is to focus on: practices, rather than problems; developing policy aimed at particular lifestyle groups; and exploiting alternative techniques, such as social marketing and segmentation, to carefully direct policy where it might be most effective. The consequence of this is that policy can be formulated that is likely to support incremental behavioral change, which also holds the potential to bridge the intention-behavior gap and encourage more environmentally conscious behaviors.

Throughout the book Barr’s response to the “cultural-turn” in geography is apparent, which for him is lacking in some way. But by turning to social psychology is at the expense of other socio-technical explanations that could also offer insights into the meanings and significance of people’s discourses and the role of local conditions in influencing attitudes and behaviors. But Barr makes no apology for this and by placing the idea of environmental action at the heart of his discussion; he emulates

psychological ideas about wanting to change people's behavior. Indeed by recognizing the powerful influence quantitative data can have on the acquisition of knowledge and the policy making process, Barr makes a compelling case.

Barr's writing style is lucid and engaging, taking the reader through the core ideas and concepts with ease, though a few typographical errors do at times detract the reader from the author's argument. But this aside, even the lengthy presentation of the quantitative data analysis is easy to follow, written in a lively and interesting manner, something other statistics-orientated research often fails to do. Without doubt the text is accessible for graduate-level teaching and is a worthwhile text for anyone interested in furthering their understanding of sustainable development and environmental action in the UK. While more experienced quantitative-trained readers will be familiar with the analysis techniques exploited, committed qualitative readers may be found wanting for more contextual information. But even so, the combining of different research approaches to provide contrasting and at times competing perspectives on the same phenomena, though nothing new, is increasing in popularity across academia – which Barr certainly makes an interesting contribution to here.